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The Blues

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The Blues

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Abstract

G REEK rubbed his eyes and looked up from his battered drums out into the gloom. “The Shadows—Jazz Center of 42nd Street”—but it didn’t look much different from any other hole in the wall he’d been in in the last ten years. Same scarred-up round tables, same rotten watered drinks, same dirty light bulbs disguised with crinkled colored cellophane...

The boy awakens reluctantly. The sun is out and the
breeze scarcely moves his curtains.
Outdoors he whistles up the dog to go down the hill
for the cows.

He opens his eyes to a vista of pastures and fields racing past.
His head aches,
He is cramped from sitting up all night, and he wants a
shower very badly.
The train rattles incessantly, roaring as people
open the door to go to breakfast.
He watches a boy and a dog running across a field.
For a moment he feels
The wet grass against his legs, hears the dog and the cows,
feels the sun warm on his bare arms.
Then he stands, and walks unsteadily down the aisle
toward the dining car.

The Blues

by John Lewis
English, Sr.

GREEK rubbed his eyes and looked up from his battered
drums out into the gloom. "The Shadows—Jazz Cen-
ter of 42nd Street"—but it didn't look much different from
any other hole in the wall he'd been in in the last ten years.
Same scarred-up round tables, same rotten watered drinks,
same dirty light bulbs disguised with crinkled colored cello-
phane. Ghostly shapes of patrons moved in and out of the
haze. Cigarettes flared, winked, and died in the far corners
of the room. The stinking smoke choked the rays of colored
light like a heavy fog. It burnt its way into Greek's nostrils
and stung his eyes until they watered. He tried to focus on
some bright spot in the darkness. There wasn't any. Just

darkness over and over again with the white ghosts leering up at him on the bandstand.

"Com'on, drummer man, play some music, drummer boy, while we get stoned and throw up here in the dark."

Greek took his grimy handkerchief out of his right pocket and soaked the sweat off his forehead. It was like being stuffed in a closet full of garbage with the door shut and the heat on and no way to get out.

He dropped the soggy cloth under his chair and picked up the sticks. His brown hands gripped the straight shafts, and his fingers ran up and down their smooth surface.

"Hey, Greek, blues in C." From the piano, Mole looked over at the drummer with his one good eye and gave the order.

The Greek nodded and with a brown and broken thumb reassuringly thumped the heads on his drums. Like old friends with familiar voices, they responded to his touch. He shook the old stiffness out of his back and shoulder and tried a quick rim shot on the snare drum. Drunken heads turned toward the sound, annoyed by that colored boy's intrusion on their sodden silence.

"Hey, drunks," the Greek hollered silently. "Watch this, drunks; listen up slobs. This nigger boy is gonna take you right out of here. We're gonna jive you slobs so bad you'll run ragged tryin' to catch up."

The Greek's eyes blazed through his tears. He sat up straight now, senses vibrating, ready to lay down the time. He cracked a toothy yellow smile over to Isaac, the bass player, who was hunched over his instrument, intently testing the strings. Isaac sensed it too . . . the blues . . . all night long they waited for this number.

"Yeah, Greek, put 'em on, Greek." Isaac lifted his eyes clear to the ceiling and laughed right back at the drummer. "Put the slobs on!"

The Mole smiled at his two sidemen and began to beat his worn shoe on the wooden floor. One . . . two . . . one . . . two . . . three . . . four.

Greek picked up the time in his right hand on the ride cymbal. His wrist rocked away, snapping back and forth, laying down the beat. Isaac was with him now, his fingers

working the rough gut strings in time with the thumping of Greek's bass drum.

The Mole came on in, his brown head bobbing up and down with Greek's right hand. His wailing, dissonant chords shouted the blues—the cry of a weary fieldhand, the earthy groans of a New Orleans stevedore, the shouting jubilation of a Mississippi gospel choir. Chords built on chords, words on words, as Mole made the Deacon, his fond name for the beer-stained piano, preach to the heathen.

Ching, ching, ching went the Greek's right hand on the ride cymbal. He lifted his head and smiled. Chop . . . went the left stick on the rim of the snare drum. He looked across at Isaac playing the hell out of his bass solo. The strings vibrated with a subdued thunder, a driving groove in perfect time with Greek's rocking beat.

Then it was Greek's turn. The sticks left snares and cymbals and flew to the big floor tom-tom. This was Greek's favorite drum. The sticks jumped and kicked up and down in the big brown hands as the drummer poured out his insides onto the calf skin. New sweat glistened on his jerking forehead and ran down into his eyes. Accents rolled out from the big bass drum.

"Go, nigger boy," the gloom screamed at him. "Beat them drums, boy," the drunks leered up at him from the smoke, but he didn't see or hear them. He was gone, far above the stink of cigarettes, above the feel of scummy beer. He was flyin', man, way up there, flyin' on the roar of his drums. His whole body was exploding with energy—hands and feet thumping, rolling, crashing around the drum set with insane intensity, his face contorted with exertion.

"Hey, slobs, look up here, way up here. I'm up here, man, and you can't even see me, you poor drunk slobs."

"O.K., Greek, last time," shouted Mole as the drummer ended his chorus with a crash of the ride cymbal.

Once again he joined the piano and bass . . . as a rock-solid unit they took one more chorus. He smiled at Mole and Isaac. They were talking, man. They'd been there and they'd go again . . . but now back to the slobs, the ghosts that lived in the dark and smoked cigarettes and drank bad booze and never knew what they had missed.